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*la honoraire place St Etienne*

F. BOISSON

DE CHALONS  
A BRIGHTON

Voyage d'une Société musicale Française  
en Angleterre.



CHALONS-SUR-MARNE

IMPRIMERIE-LIBRAIRIE J.-L. LE ROY, RUE D'ORFÈUIL, 27.

F. Boisson

# DE CHALONS

## A BRIGHTON

Voyage d'une Société musicale Française en Angleterre  
1881

translation by Suzanne Hinton 2021

TO M. LE ROY

Editor of the Newspaper « Le Progrès de la Marne, » in Châlons<sup>1</sup>

SIR,

*You have been so kind as to ask me for a detailed account of our Society's journey to England. The invaluable encouragement that "Le Progrès" has unstintingly afforded our project, obliges me to respond to your kind appeal and it is with very real pleasure that I send you the following notes, written each day and which, although they may fail to be of interest to your readers, have at least the merit of being an accurate report of the various events relating to the presence of our Society at the Brighton Music Competition.*

### **Dancing on the high seas**

The rules for the Brighton Musical Festival informed us that the Competition was open to French, Belgian and Swiss Philharmonic Societies and would be held on 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> September 1881.

Fifty-seven Societies responded to this invitation from the organising committee. One month in advance, we all received the following titles which our massed bands were to play at the grand concert which was to precede the music competition proper:

1. *God Save the Queen* (English national anthem)
2. *The Marseillaise*
3. *Marche Héroïque* - Schubert
4. *Marche Populaire* - Pirouelle
5. *March from A Midsummer Night's Dream* - Mendelshonn [sic]
6. *Sonata Pathétique* (adagio) – Beethoven [sic]

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<sup>1</sup> Until 1997, this town was called Châlons-sur-Marne. In 1881, the population of Châlons was 23,000. In the same year, Brighton (excluding Hove) had a population of over 100,000 inhabitants (although later in this text the author claims the population of Brighton is 160,000).

Any Society wishing to take part in the competitions (at least those wanting to perform in all parts of the programme) had a great deal of work cut out for them as, in addition, they had to prepare, as best they could, the compulsory piece which had been sent at the same time. As far as our Society was concerned this included: for the orchestra, an extended fantasia based on *Polyeucte* (Gounod's<sup>2</sup> latest opera), and for the string section, a *Symphonic Overture* by Antiome; these two scores were, as usual, riddled with mistakes and correcting them required infinite care and time. With the chosen pieces and the solos, that made *eleven items* which we had to study in just a month. Thanks to the good will, dedication and enthusiasm of all the players we managed this onerous task. All these difficulties were exacerbated by the new programmes and administrative details we had to organise in readiness for the four new music festivals we have created for le Grand Jard<sup>3</sup> (for which you<sup>4</sup> have kindly published the programmes). I doubt whether any amateur Society could have worked harder in so short a time, and this fact merits mention.

Having left Châlons on Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> September, after a final concert given the previous day in the municipal theatre, we arrived the following morning in Dieppe with several players' wives and a few honorary members who were eager to accompany us.

An incident which is worthy of note marked the first stage of our journey.

Just as we were boarding the train in the St-Lazare Station [Paris], the constant hustle and bustle of our players had attracted the attention of all the other travellers. As we were busy with the countless preparations for our departure, we failed to notice the wily attentions of a certain person near one of our young ladies. He was well-dressed and wore his cane hooked into his lapel buttonhole. He seemed to be taking a great deal of interest in a newspaper which he was holding in his left hand. This strange *Gentleman* was walking up and down the waiting-room but never lost sight of the particular prey that he was stalking. Unfortunately for him, one of our honorary members had been observing his odd behaviour for several minutes and managed to seize the man's hand, the hand which had been kept free for the very purpose of wandering indiscreetly into the dress pocket of our esteemed lady member.

The train was about to leave; it was too late to put the unscrupulous man into the hands of the authorities. Yet a proportionate chastisement would have been only too well deserved. With the strength of a Sampson (albeit before Delila had dealt with him) our loyal protector managed to land him a punishing series of blows which terminated only when the station staff called out the imminent departure of the train.

We spent the whole night in the compartments of the train. At 6am we heard the cry: "Dieppe". Barely were we out of the station than everyone ran down to the beach to catch their first glimpse<sup>5</sup> of the sea about which we had talked so long.

If truth be told, after the excitement prompted by such a sight, many a face clouded over at the thought that we were about to spend five consecutive hours sailing on this vast expanse. The ladies, especially,

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Gounod was to have been one of the competition judges. He withdrew at very short notice.

<sup>3</sup> This park in Châlons still has a magnificent band stand.

<sup>4</sup> The chief editor of *Le Progrès de la Marne*, a local newspaper published three times a week.

<sup>5</sup> Châlons-en-Champagne is 162 miles from the nearest seaside which is at Dieppe. This must really have been the very first time that many of them had seen the sea.

did not appear at all sanguine. Nevertheless, make our journey we would have to and, as we waited for departure time, which was not until midday, the English paddle steamer *Victoria*<sup>6</sup>, which was to be our means of transport, was put at our disposal by the obliging M. Marcillet, harbour station master. We made use of this time to explore the ship from stem to stern, then, as there was still an hour before we left, we went up to the foredeck to rehearse the competition pieces one last time.

Daytime crossing thought it might be, it was not without numerous difficulties. The boat could leave only with the registered number of passengers. This number was far from being reached with only the four Societies which had arrive in Dieppe at the same time as ourselves. From this point of view, the rules are strict and even the telegram from one of the Directors<sup>7</sup>, which had been forwarded to the Brighton Committee in my name and without my knowledge, could not hasten our leaving port. The person who sent the following reply, (and I failed to identify him despite all my enquiries) must have been aware of the rules: "Have a beer and shut up," was all it said. You can imagine my surprise on reading such a telegram, quite unexpectedly, coming from England. It was impossible to find who had written it as English law allows international telegrams to be sent unsigned.

Anyway, it was certainly not this telegram which was going to change matters. Fortunately, the 11 o'clock train brought with it a large number of passengers bound for Brighton and who wanted no more than to leave immediately.

Our serenade on the deck encouraged the passengers to be patient.

Attracted by the music, an ever-growing crowd was beginning to line the quayside.

The great good humour with which the crowd listened to us and the generous applause spurred us on to continue our improvised concert, and we would probably have played our whole repertoire had a movement of the ship not alerted us that we were leaving shore. The ship steamed slowly out of the port, escorted by the crowd which pushed and shoved in order to follow it right to the end of the jetty. At that moment, we struck up the *Marseillaise* and did not conclude until we were out at sea. Describing what we felt at such a moment is impossible and we will forever, yes forever, guard that cherished memory.

The glittering sun, the cheers of the crowd, the farewells, the innumerable fluttering handkerchiefs, the wide stretch of water that we were on the point of encountering, and then the sight of the mighty Calvary at the mouth of the harbour<sup>8</sup>, all moved us deeply. Motionless on His cross, at the foot of which beat the ineffectual waves, Christ calmly watched the travellers go by. I could see that many aboard had great difficulty in preventing a tear welling up in their eyes.

Little by little, land was disappearing. The captain, in a most tactful gesture, sailed the ship in a tight half-circle so that we could bid goodbye to the port for a last time and then she was underway. We

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<sup>6</sup> The *PS Victoria* was built for the London, Brighton and South Coast Railway in 1878 and was wrecked off France in 1887 with the loss of 19 lives.

<sup>7</sup> Probably a director of the London, Brighton and South Coast railway, owner of the *PS Victoria*. The Directors of the LB&SCR were amongst the main promoters of the festival and competition.

<sup>8</sup> The church of Notre-Dame-de-Bonsecours had been built on the clifftop only five years previously. Clearly it did not impress the travellers as much as the calvary which, at that time, stood on the quayside.

could still see land for a short time, and then nothing. Water, water, and more water ... as far as the eye could see. We were out at sea. I could pen many of the thoughts occasioned by this moment and I will never forget this dialogue between two of our young players as they leant on the starboard rail:

“My! it must be deep here. I’ve tried to look but you just can’t see the bottom.”

“Of course not,” replied the other one, “don’t you know that there is even more water here than in the *fosse aux Élèves*<sup>9</sup>. In Châlons they told me the sea was as deep as the steeple of our St. Prudentienne is high.”

“Phew, just think! If we sank right here, we would be out of our depth. That wouldn’t be much fun ...”

One of the two speakers soon, and with good reason, had to abandon his attempts to measure the depth of the sea, sharing, as he did, the same malise as not a few of the others.

The sea was in fact very calm and as placid as we could have hoped for. Having admired the superb view before us for quite some time, having counted, in the distance and for as far as the eye could see, ships following their own allotted routes, and having, pointlessly, gone out of our way to try to spot Coolus<sup>10</sup> or Mangougues<sup>11</sup> which the jokers had claimed were just beyond the woods on the left, we finally thought of organising a dance to which, as one of us said, the entrance ticket would be *gratis*. Whereupon we picked up our instruments which were already showing signs of tarnish from the sea spray.

At the very first note, dishevelled but familiar heads started to emerge from within the ship. Their owners had recognised our repertoire and wanted, I spite of everything, to join in. There was just one – the one sitting on the companionway leading to the main deck - who remained entirely unresponsive. The same man who, as we were leaving Dieppe, claimed he was sorry he had not brought along his rod and a length of horsehair so he could fish out a few sardines. Wanting to take his mind off his sorry state, we encouraged him to join in with his colleagues: his cornet part was absolutely necessary: “I can’t,” he stammered, “I’ve ... *saluted* the sea twelve times already,” at which point he began for the thirteenth time.

Nevertheless, the dance started up on the main deck with our orchestra supplemented by the town band from Chartres. The playing left much to be desired. Some sections disappeared from time to time and the circle of players often took on an odd shape whenever a particularly strong wave swept everyone to the same side of the deck. We noticed this even more toward the end of the crossing. But we were not yet performing at the competition and the dancers made no complaint about the fleeting imperfections in the music. We had just struck up a polka when suddenly there was a shout: Land! The orchestra abruptly stopped, and all eyes turned instinctively toward the spot being pointed out. It was not just the lone invalid on the companionway who was eager to see this enforced rest come to an end. Alas! The suddenness of this interjection was the cause of yet another upset as it compelled him to zigzag his way across the deck and there cling to the ropes which he could not leave without upset.

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<sup>9</sup> Possibly a small lake, pond or even part of a canal where schoolboys would swim or play.

<sup>10</sup> A suburb of Châlons, hence over 160 miles away from the ship.

<sup>11</sup> A small village just outside Châlons.

So this was England! It was that tiny spot over there, low down and apparently quite incapable of containing all of us... Our lady passengers wanted to gaze upon it too and came up on deck. A courageous decision and most unfortunate for some of them, as there was still an hour before we could easily see the cliffs at Newhaven. The end of our journey was nigh, at last. The fishermen's boats and the seagulls told us that we were nearing land and the gallant captain of the *Victoria* informed us that we were entering English waters.

Mounted on our podium on the foredeck, we slowly slipped past a fort perched atop a mountain. We were at the mouth of a wide canal, some 60 metres across, where we could no longer feel the motion of the sea. That did not prevent one of our number, who had not only been our clarinettist but had also been quite healthy up to that moment, from leaving us very suddenly. A few English soldiers saluted their national anthem which we had just started to play. Five more minutes and we would be in Newhaven. On the riverbanks a packed crowd followed the boat to its dock. Everyone cheered us. We could hear rousing applause. Hats were being thrown in the air. We were asked for the *Marseillaise* which we played as the other passengers disembarked. Then it was our turn to go ashore. We left the deck. One more stride and, at last, we were stepping onto English soil. The crossing had lasted just five hours<sup>12</sup>.

### **Nocturnal perambulations**

A special train was waiting for the *Victoria* to take its passengers to Brighton. All that separated us from its waiting carriages was a wide walkway. Customs formalities took just a few moments and straightaway we could settle into our compartments. The great comfort of the English carriages is a matter of note. They are built to a surprising level of luxury. The red wood that surrounded us was indeed mahogany. The seats and the backs in third-class are padded far better than in our second-class. And what is more, there was air, space and an electric bell in each compartment.

Hardly had we settled down than an inspector came to check our tickets and *click* he had locked us in with a special key. Here we were, provisionally prisoners in our compartment which we could not leave. (This form of surveillance applies, apparently, to the whole of the English network). A few instants before the train left, the same inspector released our door and we were off, full steam ahead, to Brighton. I say 'full steam ahead' as it would be impossible not to notice the speed at which we were travelling. Tight curves, fast gradients, and numerous branch lines flashed by. The expression 'gobbling up distance' is only too applicable to English railways. So it was that after about half an hour of this headlong rush, we soon were able to see (it was nearly 7pm by then) the houses of the higher districts of the town of Brighton.

Barely had we uttered these words than we had arrived! ... A sigh of relief escaped from every breast. All that remained for us to do was to *find* our representative and, following the fatigue of a whole night spent in a train, to make the most of the accommodation which he had booked for us.

We arrived at the exit from the station. It was raining<sup>13</sup>. We hunted around, we looked about, we shouted out: "Châlons". No reply. We went back into the station. What should we do? Our members took

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<sup>12</sup> In 1881 there were no time zones. Local time in Dieppe would have been within one or two minutes of Newhaven / Greenwich Mean Time. The journey had taken a full five hours.

<sup>13</sup> The canopy at the front of Brighton Station was not put up until the following year. There was no shelter from the rain once outside the station.

shelter under the arches where we had alighted whilst I went in search of a cab to take me *post haste* to the principal organiser of the competition.

I hailed a cabman: “*King’s Road 15*<sup>14</sup>”

He gazed at me in amazement. I repeated the address. Even greater amazement. This gave me a foretaste of the difficulties in making ourselves understood which we were to encounter more than once subsequently. Not knowing how to convey the information to the cabman, I took it into my head to write, in letters a foot tall, on one of the enormous columns of the station, the name of the district I was seeking.

“Yès, Yès,” he said, laughing and probably laughing at me. “Kengs Reed” (or something approximating to it)

“*Ya, Ya,*” I said in my turn then, realising that I was not dealing with a German said, “*Oui, oui.*”

Seeing the new error of my ways, I let a *zut* escape my lips and at this we galloped off to a house of grand appearance where, after my having resorted to an excessively diverse dumbshow, a hugely tall lodger informed me that the owner was at a different address. This address I conveyed to my cabman who, yet again, had the greatest difficulty in deciphering it.

At last, I had the great pleasure of finding the person I was looking for and he spoke French perfectly. Oh joy! he had with him a colleague who had joined the Society of Composers of Music in Paris at the same time as myself.

I took them both back to the station where my companions were still waiting and finding time hanging heavy. There we learned, to our great dismay, that our contact was waiting for us at Newhaven for the 11pm boat and that he had upon his person the addresses of our booked accommodation. A telegram was immediately dispatched, and it was decided that, in the meantime, we should be taken to the hall in The Dome which had been designated for the bands’ meals. Everyone dragged their luggage in that direction, in a pouring rain which soon soaked us to the bone. It was a long way<sup>15</sup> and our crocodile was no more than a line of weary stragglers. We were in a hurry to get to our destination and took no note of the attractions of the town; it was not the time for such things.

We knew, anyway, that the town we were in was big: the length of the walk proved it.

At last we arrived: for many of our number it was none too soon.

The fear of getting lost in a strange town enabled even the most fatigued to find their legs and keep up. And so it was with very real satisfaction that we walked into The Dome which was hung with hundreds of flags in the colours of France, England, Switzerland, Belgium ... etc ...

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<sup>14</sup> Home of Bernard Ernest Cherifel de la Grave (1828-1893), school master, text-book author, photographer, musical concert promoter.

<sup>15</sup> Only half a mile, but it must have seemed much, much further to the tired and wet musicians.

Imagine a hall with the dimensions of the square in front of our Town Hall [in Châlons], about 20 metres high and having across its width numerous tables, each with room for a hundred or so diners<sup>16</sup>.

We crossed this room without much ado and passed into another vast hall, its luxurious horse-shoe shape fitted up with boxes, a stage, a stained glass window like those of a church and a pipe organ with three manuals one above the other. This was the concert hall where, at that moment stewards were handing out to every participant a printed sheet with easily detachable tickets rather like postage stamps. Each ticket bore the words: *Lunch, dinner or bed for...* and was to be exchanged in payment for admission to the hall or for our accommodation for the night.

All these arrangements took quite some time. It was by now 9pm and people were becoming visibly tired.

Whilst we waited for our contact to arrive, which we were given to understand would be soon, we went into the dining hall, ready and willing to do full justice to the English cuisine.

Here is that first menu in detail: ham, a cold stew, salad dressed with milk (the milk replacing oil), one glass of beer. Cost: 2 francs 25. That was somewhat expensive for a single course as no-one had touched the less than appetising stew. So it was that this rather too-light meal led us to demanding our beds with renewed vigour and still our contact had not arrived.

At this point, we were asked to go back into the concert hall in order to leave space for new bands who were just arriving.

A certain level of unrestrained discontent started to make itself felt, for now we had to wait again, - and for how much longer? – for the addresses of our accommodation. We all did as best we could to rest a little.

At last, at 11pm, I heard talk of accommodation tickets for a band which had not yet arrived. I tried every means I could to ensure that the tickets were allocated to us and I was delighted to be successful.

Our trudge through the town resumed. The rain was falling ever harder. We stopped from time to time. Rooms were inspected by the organiser who had come with us. “Two beds ... in here,” he said when he returned. Everyone made a rush, but even that was space for only four people.

So, having tramped the town for a good hour and repeated this performance 50 times I could at least be sure that all our musicians had a bed. Soaked to the skin, I reached the room I had been allocated. I wondered what the time was as I pulled out my watch. Gone midnight.

Well, that was two days well spent<sup>17</sup> and despite the thinness of my very flat mattress, I did as my comrades were doing and thought that for the first time in our existences, all of us would be resting under a sky which was not that of France.

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<sup>16</sup> This identifies this first hall as the Brighton Corn Exchange, a rectangular space. The neighbouring Dome concert hall is an almost circular theatre and has raked seats.

<sup>17</sup> The first two days were Sunday 4 September spent in a train crossing France. Monday 5 September was spent on board ship and arriving in Brighton. Tuesday 6 September was a free morning for the band. The competition was to start late in the afternoon.



### **The land of ham**

Meals were fixed for the following times: 9am, breakfast, 4pm dinner, so the following day, Tuesday, we gathered at The Dome. Everyone was up and about well before breakfast, having been woken by the terrible thundering, much like that of a cannon, of the sea crashing against the cliffs. The bad weather had not abated during the night and a violent wind was raging.

Sincerely sympathising with those of our colleagues who were still travelling, we set off for the beach. What a magnificent view – can there be another like it in the world! Brighthelm's [sic] esplanade is, indeed, 5 kilometres long. The side opposite the beach is lined with private houses, amongst which is the Grand Hotel with its eight floors. Each house vies with the rest for first prize in luxury and elegance.

At this early hour and despite the weather, which was soon to settle, we were not a little surprised to see men and women bathers occupying the wheeled cabins which belong to the people who hire out bathing costumes. We were made an offer we could not refuse and for half a shilling (12 sous<sup>18</sup>), in a trice half the musicians of the Philharmonic Society of Châlons were taking their first sea-bath, a bath with no danger, for even at a distance of 150 metres from the shore, the water barely came as high as our chests. The seabed was firm and, at low tide, looked much like the tarmac on our roads. Having struggled with the impressive waves which swept us back to shore, we were quite ready to do full justice to any breakfast which might be awaiting us - at least that did not need to be heated up.

On our way back, we exchanged impressions of the previous night and we were unanimous: the thin mattresses, on their webbed frames, of the English beds which had been put at our disposal, continually sank in the most alarming way to the detriment of our ribs. All the beds were embellished with insufferable insects and so were declared not a patch on French beds. On the other hand, the working people of Brighton cannot be compared with those in Dieppe whom we had left the previous day. The latter did not, indeed, present a pleasing appearance. The fishermen's wives in their rags, with their tired and drawn faces, their short, tight dresses and their heavy leather boots which had never seen a brush and which some of them don whenever they pull small cargo boats up to the quayside – they had all had left a dismal impression on those of us who were not aware of the heavy work that has to be done in such a major port.

We had to admit that it is quite different in Brighthelm [sic] where the working population conducts itself better and seems to enjoy relative affluence.

As we were exchanging our impressions, we reached The Dome. Outside we were assailed by a flurry of tenacious youngsters who insisted on cleaning our shoes, and then finally we managed to get into the banquet hall<sup>19</sup> with a thousand other hungry souls like ourselves. As on the previous day, the caterers had omitted to supply any napkins. The menu was the same as the evening before, minus the glass of beer but with unlimited black coffee, but not of a sort that could perk us up. There were some sardines on their way to our table, but they were snapped up before they could get to their destination. Decidedly, the cold stew was to no-one's taste. Although it was the main dish, it was hardly touched and now we had to wait until 4pm, as the first sitting was invited to make way for new arrivals. Fortunately, several

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<sup>18</sup> A *sou* was one twentieth of a franc.

<sup>19</sup> Is the irony positively leaden?

of us had noticed a few small French restaurants<sup>20</sup> in the town and which would probably suit stomachs left unsatisfied by five or six black coffees. It was a real stroke of luck that we were able to treat ourselves often to a good plain meal at reasonable cost.

“What are they going to feed us tonight?” came from all lips as the time came to sit down at 4pm.

All our colleagues were beginning to be sated with ham and the infamous cold stew. We craned our necks to spot as quickly as we could any novelty that might be served at tables before ours. Disappointment! Oh, woe! The inevitable ham, the indigestible stew yet again and, as before, the single glass of beer, downed in a trice.

“But they promised us soup,” came the cry from every corner.

“*Voilà, voilà!*” said the French waiter serving us, and he proudly brought in a large soup tureen, as big as a washbasin and which looked to me as if it was made of wood. (I would just like to note, in passing, how odd it is to see all these unusually large receptacles which the English use.) This particular basin had been conscientiously filled with large lumps of ingredient which failed to keep afloat in a few spoonfuls of a thick sauce at which we looked askance. Then of a common accord we burst out laughing. The soup was donated to other beings - and those generally not bipeds - which must have been waiting for it.

To adhere strictly to the truth, it must be admitted that, with the help of not a few tips to our waiter (we always chose the same table), our band was eventually able to share, at one meal, lukewarm mashed potatoes followed, in the guise of desert, by a dish of jam, the identity of which was as difficult to determine as was its colour: a sort of grey, or perhaps puce. Spread on unlimited slices of potato bread and with our single glass of beer, our bread-and-butter was far from tasting normal.

But no matter! No sooner had we mulled it over than we had forgotten all about it. And then, what did we hear? It sounded as if someone was calling out for Châlons? What was happening?

A distraught French jury member rushed up to me and asked: “Have you just arrived from France? What were they saying when you left? Is it true about this terrible accident? Tell me, quick.”

And so it was that on the Tuesday, at seven o’clock in the evening, we first heard the news of the catastrophe<sup>21</sup> which had befallen the band from La Ferté-Alais, the *opening* band on the programme for the competition. The announcement of this terrible disaster devastated us all. Everyone felt deeply the calamity which had just taken place; and thus it was, amidst the painful bewilderment of this tragic news that, soon after, I learned from the organising committee that they had selected me to lead the massed orchestras and bands in the playing of the *Marseillaise* at the evening concert at which our orchestra would be performing: the band to play the Overture from *Le Cheval de Bronze*<sup>22</sup> and the orchestra the Overture from *Les Aveugles de Tolède* [sic]<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> The most notable being ‘La Maison Blanche’ at 77 West Street.

<sup>21</sup> For a more detailed account of this accident which killed 20 of the Ferté-Alais band and injured many more, see the French-Brighton post ‘Brighton’s French Festival of Music’ (<https://suzannehinton.uk>)

<sup>22</sup> Opera by Daniel Auber and Eugène Scribe

<sup>23</sup> *Les deux aveugles de Tolède*, opera by Étienne Méhul

### **A concert without a flaw**

That day<sup>24</sup> we were not needed for the music competition. This information had been brought to our attention on the evening we had arrived, and this encouraged us to visit the town while we were free, and so that is what we did on the Tuesday. The Aquarium, which opened in 1872 and cost 25 million [francs], was our first choice. Moreover, entry was free for bandsmen who had only to show their travel papers at the turnstile.

This magnificent establishment, the most complete of any in existence (so a notice said) entirely merits its universal reputation. The unheard-of opulence everywhere, the very rare collections which it houses, its mosaic colonnades, not to mention the costly materials used in its construction and to decorate its rooms held us spellbound for some considerable time. A theatre stage, much like those in our café-concerts in Paris, nestles in the main auditorium. The whole time we were there, this stage was taken up with competing choral societies, and it was from the Aquarium Orchestra that we were able to procure the services of two excellent double basses and a few viola players which our orchestra needed for its performance the following day. They cost us just 400 francs.

The floor above, open to the sky, is no less remarkable with its wild animals, its large *Skating-Ring* [sic] next to which there was another bandstand and a vast restaurant<sup>25</sup>.

Being in the middle of the esplanade which I have already described, the Aquarium has a terrace which affords a view which it is impossible to describe. The wide horizon, the ocean before us for as far as we could see, ships fading into the blue yonder and seemingly touching the sky, a myriad of little sailboats just off shore being tossed about by the waves, all this made us forget completely our weary journey.

However, we would have to tear ourselves away from our contemplation of the sights if we wished to have further good memories of Brighton. For the modest sum of 3 *shellings* [sic] an hour, we were able to hire sturdy open carriages, each of which would take four people. And thus it was that we rode past the famous *Chain'* [sic] *Pier* which juts out 1,200 metres into the open sea.

On the other side of the esplanade is an uninterrupted parade of private houses and shops, their brilliance easily rivalling the finest buildings in our capital city. Throughout our whole ride we never tired of admiring how strikingly uniform they all were with their sash windows<sup>26</sup> (that is, they opened from top to bottom), the tiny gardens in front of them and the pretty lodges that were all part of the arrangements.

We went into the centre of the town. It was even more entrancing. The squares, the oriental-style Royal *Pavillon* [sic] former home of King George IV, the theatre nestled behind its arcades where posters

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<sup>24</sup> Tuesday 6 September, the first day of the competition. The only duty for the band from Châlons was at the 8pm concert in The Dome.

<sup>25</sup> In his enthusiasm, the writer may have been confused: the indoor Brighton Aquarium Terrace (also known as the Roof Garden or Winter Garden) had a glazed roof and could have contained animals (probably stuffed).

The skating rink was situated on the outdoor roof terrace mentioned in the next paragraph.

<sup>26</sup> Evocatively known in French as *fenêtres à guillotine*.

were advertising ‘The Drum-Major’s Daughter’<sup>27</sup>, the bustle in the streets, the magnificent shops, business in full flow, everything dazzled us.

It was just not possible; we were in Paris and it was 5pm and were on the Boulevard des Italiens! And just as we were expressing our amazement at so many marvels assembled in a town which, after all, has no more than 160,000 inhabitants, we learned that, because of its exceptional position it is the favourite resort of the wealthy from London who never fail to come here to spend Sunday at least (the day given over exclusively to repose).

But the *cuisine* of The Dome was calling us, and we did not wish to make it wait any longer. This was the meal I have already described and which was, as you can imagine, rapidly consumed.

The time had come when we were to appear *officially* in public. Our banner was raised, white ties were donned, the music ready and all our instruments burnished and back in good order. Everything was set. We crossed the concert hall, which was almost full, and made our way onto the raked platform allocated to us. There was a burst of applause. Doubtless we had come in at the same time as some famous person whose arrival was being greeted by this acclaim. Our banner was unfurled on the stage. The cheering became even louder. No doubt about it. It was the banner which caused the ovation. Greetings, Oh banner!

Despite the high price of the tickets – 15 francs for the cheapest seats in the stalls – and the fact that it can hold 3,000 people, the hall was soon full. There had been no complimentary tickets and I had a great deal of difficulty in smuggling in a few of our own associates through a small side door. Soon, comfortably seated on chairs taken from the stage and which we had passed to them, they could imagine themselves the finest folk in England, sitting alongside the noble lords who were all around them.

The concert started with *God Save* [sic] that the whole audience, standing, listened to reverently. Same ceremony for the *Marseillaise* for which the audience clamoured and which I conducted standing on a chair between two awkwardly placed grand pianos at the front of the stage, the musicians and the singers facing me on their raked platform to play the piece.

So who ever spoke of English reserve?

And what superlative success for the great artistes who were applauded during the magnificent evening. The receipts surpassed 38,000 francs. My account of the concert will be complete once I have mentioned the names of Messieurs Vallaret the younger, Auguez, Caron (from the Paris Opera) and Mesdames Castillon and Appia. The latter is soon to make her debut at that very same opera house. It was between the two halves of the concert that the Lord [sic] Mayor of Brighton, in his official robes (red velvet coat and solid gold chain round his neck) which conjured up memories of quite another age, announced the news of the accident which had befallen the band from La Ferté-Alais. His speech, which I cannot quote in full, was interrupted by loud applause. He was proposing, so I understood, to take up a collection in aid of the families of the victims and took upon himself the role of sidesman. His lady and several others did likewise. The lady artistes took up the task of passing amongst the massed players on the stage, during which our band played, on our own, Pirouelle’s *Marche Populaire*. Within

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<sup>27</sup> *La fille du Tambour-Major* comic operetta by Jacques Offenbach.

fifteen minutes, the Lord Mayor returned to the stage, seconded by Abel Simon, to announce that donations had amounted to £50, approximately 1,250 francs<sup>28</sup>. The result was greeted with a continuous round of cheers.

Oh! You Englishmen, this was an outpouring of the heart which the musical societies present will not forget for a long time, and we thank you on behalf of our unfortunate brothers!

While this was taking place, we had been doing our best, for quite some while, to organise ourselves in the limited space which had been left us in the middle of the stage. We had been provided with just five inadequate music stands for the piece which was to open the second half of the concert. This would be no easy task, given that there were fifty of us about to play.

Finally, our preparations completed, we were ready to start, having had the inspiration of making up for the missing stands, so essential for our string section, with the back of the person in front of each player thanks to the innovation of pinning the scores to their shoulders. However, it was important that each musician should not forget that he was playing a double role, and that he should not move by an inch. If I tell of this rather comic detail which condemned our group to total immobility, it is merely to recommend our system to other conductors who find themselves in a similarly embarrassing situation.

What is certain is that the role played by the Philharmonic Society of Châlons did not go unremarked that evening. The proof lies in the general approval which followed the playing of the two pieces performed by the orchestra and the band, and then the illustrated account of the concert given in the *Pictorial World*.

It was during this concert that I had the pleasure of meeting Monsieur Meriel from the training ship *Borda* and correspondent of *Le Monde illustré*. Not knowing where to sit, he had sought refuge with us.

At much the same time, we had to bid farewell to two friendly delegates, Messieurs Eddie and Bourgoigne who had been assigned to us by the West France Railways<sup>29</sup> to escort us on our journey from Paris to Brighton. Neither should we forget, in our sincere thanks, Monsieur Delhay at St-Lazare Station who, upon our precipitate departure, had given us so much useful information relative to our journey.

As we were leaving the concert hall, we learned that Mr Kuhe<sup>30</sup>, the English Ullmann [sic]<sup>31</sup>, who was in the hall that evening, was organising a further concert for Thursday at 3pm along with Abel Simon the enthusiastic director of the journal *L'Orphéon*. This concert was to be exclusively for the benefit of La Ferté-Alais. There is no doubt that French musical society's debt to England will be great.

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<sup>28</sup> Probably between £2,000 and £3,000 in 2020. Approximately £1.00 (2020) for every person in the hall.

<sup>29</sup> The *Chemins de fer de l'Ouest* company operated, mainly in north-west France, from 1855 until 1909.

<sup>30</sup> Wilhelm Kuhe (1823-1912) set up the annual Brighton music festival in 1870. The 1881 festival was the penultimate one in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1881, Mr Kuhe was living at 8 Lower Rock Gardens, Brighton.

<sup>31</sup> Bernard Ullmann (1817-1885) was one of the very first professional impresarios. He worked both in Europe and the United States organising and promoting concerts and festivals.

Having declined the gracious invitation to continue the evening in the drawing-room of an exceedingly wealthy music lover, it was time to think of returning to our respective accommodation, which was going to be somewhat difficult to find at that time of night.

But how were we to ask anyone the way if simply asking to have our shoes cleaned or to have a cup of tea brought to us elicited a blank stare? If you needed a hairdresser, someone would come back to you with a bottle of lemonade. In one corner of a square, an old *lady* in a white dress (English ladies favour crisp outfits in pink and white), no doubt loitering in contemplation of her next *Gin* (fortunately a gas lamppost was there to hold her up) compounded her transgressions by sending us off in completely the wrong direction. This false information meant that night was well advanced by the time we reached our lodgings. Nevertheless, we were able to sleep, assured that we would not miss the following day's rehearsal thanks to the reveille that our trumpeter sounded in our neighbourhood each morning. As we closed our eyes, we thought once more of our good friends in Châlons. Perhaps at that very moment they were wondering "Where are our musicians?" They had, dear friends, just carried, boldly and proudly, our local banner. To Châlons we gladly sent all the congratulations which we received, so that they could share in them. Little by little those images clouded over and receded. Tomorrow ... perhaps ... laurel wreaths ... medals ....

\* \* \*

Morning! The day for which we have worked so long has dawned at last.

### **Still standing**

It might be thought strange that the organisers of a music competition should open it to the public, with payment for entry, when everywhere else it would take place behind closed doors. It was a daunting honour for the bands called upon to be judged in such a way. Do they believe that this is the best way to encourage others to emulate us? That was the subject of all our conversations on the Wednesday morning. Was this discussion futile, for we were, indeed, obliged to accept the conditions of the competition as they had been set out?

We spent our morning at the Royal Palace where the superintendent politely showed us to a very convenient part of the lawn where we could practice the pieces that we had been allocated. The weather was glorious; the sun could not have shone more brightly. As we struck up the opening notes, the crowd of visitors thronging the pavements gathered round to enjoy the impromptu concert. In a trice, the saloons of the Pavilion had been emptied of their plush chairs. Taking no notice of the custodians, our audience settled down comfortably and, just for a moment, we could believe ourselves in Châlons, playing in the Allées de Forêt ... had there been a few more signs of encouragement.

The chosen venue for the competition being close by<sup>32</sup>, we waited for our band to be called. At 2pm we entered the fray by playing two of the pieces required by the programme. Our jury was composed of seven men, 3 English and 4 French under the chairmanship of Sir Julius Benedict<sup>33</sup>, conductor in the grand opera house in London as well as pupil and friend to those geniuses named Beethoven and

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<sup>32</sup> The programme of the competition lists the Châlons contingent as playing in the Music Room of the Royal Pavilion.

<sup>33</sup> Sir Julius Benedict (1804-1885) had become orchestral conductor at Drury Lane in 1835 and had remained in post for many years. He had been introduced to Beethoven in 1823.

Weber. We immediately recognised M. Durand, teacher of harmony and composition at the Paris Conservatory, M. Cressonnois, former director of music of the Guides<sup>34</sup> [sic], M. E. d'Ingrande, the well-known<sup>35</sup> composer, M. Baron<sup>36</sup>, composer and arranger of the test piece (obligatory for the advanced category): *Polyeucte*. The two other English jurors were Signor A. Randegger of the Royal Academy of Music and Robert Taylor Esq., director of the College of Church Music<sup>37</sup>. The signatures of all these judges were appended to the diplomas attached to the prizes which we won.

The formal prize-giving ceremony was preceded by the obligatory *procession* (or parade) through the main streets of Brighton. The objective of this parade was the Skating-Ring [sic] situated not far from the Pier<sup>38</sup>. The legion of players, about 2000 of us, barely filled a quarter of this immense establishment where, under the baton of Monsieur Cressonnois, the massed bands and choruses performed the ensemble pieces quoted at the beginning of this account.

There was one thing of note: the bands had to walk some distance between the two compact crowds of onlookers which lined the streets. The width of road left free was barely sufficient to allow the players to stay in their allotted places. All the supporters of our Châlons contingent had, no doubt, sworn to keep up with their band at every step of the way, and found it very difficult to stay with us, despite the advantageous position (we were first after the officials at the head of the procession) which the band had been allocated. Seeing this, two *policemen* found nothing better to do than to bring the whole parade to a complete halt in order to allow our ladies and their companions to join us, without the least fuss, between our banner and our drums. And thus it was that our band, with its one additional component, was far from being overlooked.

So who could now doubt English gallantry?

When we returned, following a short serenade to the principal organiser of the competition, it was time for the prize giving ceremony which took place in the large concert hall of The Dome.

One of our singers, a delightful yodeller, was of the opinion that our contribution was not yet at an end and that a few well-chosen words of farewell were required to thank the inhabitants of Brighton for their warm welcome. As he perched on a low post, a devilish volubility allowed him, for all of fifteen minutes, to deliver a magnificent speech in English, a language of which he had no knowledge whatsoever. If his eloquence flagged at any point, he had recourse to his cornet from which came stertorous sounds alternating with the highly imaginative yodelling. Our cornetist's patter was met with incredible success, despite no-one, us no more than anyone else, understanding a single word. His manner of pronouncing English sent the spectators into gales of laughter. A veritable crowd gathered, bringing to a halt any movement around the *Royal Pavillon* [sic]. A brigade of policemen had to intervene to restore order and as we continued on our way to The Dome, we heard these grave words

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<sup>34</sup> A compositor's error (or the author's) for 'the Guards'. Jules Cressonnois (1823-1883) had been the director of music of the Imperial Guard and was, in 1881 director of music of the Gendarmerie.

<sup>35</sup> Well-known in 1881.

<sup>36</sup> Eugène Baron (died 1893) composer of 'Brighton Valse' which was dedicated to 'Mr. Cherifel de la Grave, director of the first Brighton Music Festival'.

<sup>37</sup> In 2020, Trinity College, London,

<sup>38</sup> This was the roller-skating rink in Westfield Gardens, near the West Pier. The Hotel Metropole now stands on the site.

spoken by a *gentleman* who had not been able to prevent himself from laughing: “Aoh! Ce nationne frantzaise, baaucoup jouvial et gaëté.”

It was 9 o'clock in the evening. The prize-giving ceremony began under the chairmanship of the Lord Mayor.

The Philharmonic Society of Châlons-sur-Marne, the last to be called to the stage, won the following prizes:

BAND. – *Sight reading – Special prize awarded unanimously with the congratulations of the jury (Gold Medal)*

BAND. – *Interpretation – Special prize awarded unanimously (Laurel wreath)*

BAND. – *Soloists – Special prize awarded unanimously (Laurel wreath)*

ORCHESTRA. – *Interpretation - Special prize awarded unanimously (Laurel wreath)*

A personal prize for conducting was awarded to the director of the Society<sup>39</sup> in the form of a magnificent gold watch worth some 400 francs.

Quick now! We had to communicate these unhopd-for results to our friends in Châlons. Where was the telegraph office? We circled around it at length, without realising it was right there. But finding it was not the end of the matter. Visualise a small room, just 2 metres square with no more than a rickety table furnishing it. We looked for a form to fill in. Nothing. No ink, no pens, no pencils, and the only person there to help us was a clerk who spoke not a word of French. We had to repeat, several times and very slowly, the wording of our telegram. Naturally, it will be unintelligible when it arrives in Châlons and I immediately regretted not having written it down myself.

At last, by dint of a great deal of patience, we managed to emerge from the confusion and we left the office, wishing joy to the other conductors who were crowding into the room and muttering darkly as they looked for the non-existent paraphernalia of a telegraph office.

We were told that our missives home would encounter many a problem, for during our stay in Brighton we had been writing our letters as best we could. Usually we had to throw ourselves on the mercy of those tobacconists who sold stamps and who deigned to let us use their counters as tables. Cafes and *estaminets*<sup>40</sup> are unheard of or are very rare, being inconveniently replaced by establishments known as *Bars* which have no tables other than the one clad in zinc and where the glass of beer is briefly placed for the consumer who then drinks it down whilst on the hoof. There is a distinct lack of seats, and that is the least of the surprises afforded to any Frenchman who is accustomed to being able to settle comfortably in similar establishments.

## London

The prize giving closed the series of festivities at Brighton on the occasion of the music competition. Our part was over. And so, there was London, calling us. On the Thursday morning, very early, we boarded a Brighton train to London train. Two hours later, we had arrived in the capital of England.

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<sup>39</sup> The author himself?

<sup>40</sup> A public house which provided chairs and tables for customers – this did exist in England and was known as a saloon bar.



A surprise awaited us at the French hotel<sup>41</sup> in Gerard [sic] Street which had been specifically recommended to us but where only three rooms were available for sixty-six people. This disappointment, which can hardly be overstated was merely increased by the discussion with the cabmen who had taken us there. Each man asked, in language incomprehensible to us, a different fare for the exact same journey, thus causing us no little confusion. In the end, our musicians were refused admittance on the pretext that the hotel did not take *street musicians*. Our uniform had produced an effect which we had been far from expecting; we had been taken for a troupe of *pifferari*<sup>42</sup>.

This amazing talent for observation on the part of our would-be hotelier could be compared to another comment made in Brighton by the caterer charged with providing meals for the musicians: One day when dinner was not ready at the usual time and as complaints grew louder, we were not a little surprised to hear his reply - in French: *Attendez donc, tas de paysans* [You can just wait, you heap of yokels.] No doubt he was keen to show off his perfect command of the subtleties of our language. Upon mature reflexion, I believe I have found the reason for this unexpected admonition. Our uniform caps probably gave this unsympathetic Cerberus the idea that their French owners spent their whole lives in the countryside. And yet, there is much that I could say about the national English headgear, the top hat, of which we admired many quite remarkable examples of all shapes and sizes.

Our Society's stay in London alone would provide material for many a page. This account, already long, allows me to do no more than tell of our instructive and interesting visits to Westminster Abbey, the Tower of London, the Zoo, Trafalgar Square, Parliament and the Crystal Palace (an hour's journey from London on the metropolitan railway<sup>43</sup>).

For our excursions we frequently used the steamers which plied the Thames and which were reasonably similar, although larger, than our own *bateaux mouches*. This form of travel, on a river three times the width of the Seine in Paris, gave us the opportunity to admire the magnificent bridges which cross it. For the price of one *penny* (2 sous) we even indulged in making a journey under the water by taking the submarine tunnel. On these occasions, it was the metropolitan railway which we favoured and which for a very modest price carried its passengers on an underground route<sup>44</sup>. This rail line is extremely pleasant in so far as it is impossible to miss your train as one train follows another every three minutes at each station. You have to be quick, though, as the trains halt for just a few seconds to allow passenger to alight or to board. It is impossible not to mention the famous 'Widow Tussaud's Exhibition'. This museum enjoys such a high reputation in England that it is quite normal to hear it said that a trip to London had been wasted if the visitor had not been there. Indeed, within its rooms, authentic documents proclaimed that this coach with its worn wheels belonged to Napoleon and served at Waterloo; that van transported the prisoner Napoleon III from Sedan to a Prussian prison; and there was the uniform of an infantry lieutenant of the 97<sup>th</sup> brigade which had belonged to the Prince Imperial in the 1870 war. The

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<sup>41</sup> The 1881 London P.O. Directory lists "Viani, Pietro, *hôtel français* at 27 Gerrard Street, Soho as well as the '*Hôtel de Versailles*, Grosse, Max' at 36-38 Gerrard Street.

<sup>42</sup> Street musicians / dancers. Their main instruments were the fife and/or bagpipes.

<sup>43</sup> At the time, Crystal Palace could be reached from London on the London, Brighton and South Coast Railway or by London, Chatham and Dover Railway. The author uses the expression "metropolitan" in a generic sense.

<sup>44</sup> The Thames Tunnel which served the East London Line from 1869.

next showcase contained his little<sup>45</sup> corporal's uniform belonging to what had been the Imperial grenadier guards. Further on, we saw the rich velvet coronation robe of Napoleon I. And then, close by, the whole array of the cooking utensils used in his service on St Helena ... and the complete armour of Henry IV<sup>46</sup> etc., etc. In the gloomy *chambre des horreurs*, there was the guillotine from the Place de la Grève<sup>47</sup>, standing erect and ready for use. Its blade, according to the guide, decapitated 23,000 victims. Shelves upon shelves lined the walls, bearing the grimacing heads of the most famous and modelled immediately following the supreme punishment. Infamous scoundrels, murderers, counterfeiters and poisoners completed the collection, all represented life-sized in wax and looking quite real. The clothes they were wearing really had been theirs ...

Brrrrr! how glad we were to get out into the fresh air after the charming society we had just left.

The array of curiosities, bought at who knows what cost, that you see round every corner in Widow Tussaud's Museum, and their incontestable and duly authenticated appearance had not taken long to create a universal reputation for the establishment which is both historic and unique of its kind. That is why is not easy to gain admittance for it is always besieged by a swarm of visitors.

Should I talk about the music halls of London? By chance, I was staying at a hotel near the Alhambra<sup>48</sup>. On the evening we arrived, the posters were advertising 'The Bronze Horse'<sup>49</sup>. I was not going to pass up such a good piece of luck, for even in Paris, music lovers have been deprived of the pleasure of hearing this delightful score. The vast concert hall (The Alhambra is one of the biggest in London) was lit by nothing but innumerable gas lamps in glass spheres and which ran all along every tier of the balconies. The columns supporting the latter and the screens between boxes were embellished in like manner. The result was a certain gloominess in the centre of the hall where there were no lamps and no illuminated ceiling. A full orchestra accompanied the stage artistes extremely well despite the comedic conceits in dubious taste indulged in by the latter. But imagine my amazement when I heard, as the second piece in Act I, the well-known aria by Adam 'The Lost Jewel'<sup>50</sup>. (I am, of course, speaking of the tune as I could not be sure of the words in English.)

Oh! how sweet it is, how sweet it is to gather strawberries  
In the wood of Bayeux, the two of us, the two of us. Etc, etc ...

Oh, Monsieur Jacoby!<sup>51</sup>, for a former conductor at the Bouffes-Parisiens, it is really too bad of you to adulterate a masterpiece which, believe me, has no need of that additional music from a quadrille backed up with a thundering base drum which you composed for the ballet.

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<sup>45</sup> Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, son of Emperor Napoleon III, was photographed in the uniform 1863, aged just seven years old. He was killed in the Anglo-Zulu wars in 1879. He was 23.

<sup>46</sup> Henry IV of France 1553-1610

<sup>47</sup> Area in front of the modern-day Town Hall of Paris.

<sup>48</sup> In Leicester Square. Replaced by the Odeon Cinema in 1936.

<sup>49</sup> *Le Cheval de Bronze*. Opera by Auber and Scribe.

<sup>50</sup> 'Le Bijou Perdu'. Aria by Alphonse Adam.

<sup>51</sup> German-born Georg Jacoby (1840-1906) took up the post of conductor in the Alhambra in 1870, having left Paris where he had specialised in operetta.

By the end of the first act, I had had my fill of the Alhambra. It seems that such travesties of the works of our composers are perfectly acceptable in England. If prestigious theatres such as the Alhambra set such an example, we must wonder what performances of French works are like on lesser stages.

### **The return home**

It was now time to think of returning home. We arrived in Newhaven four hours before the boat was to leave. How were we to spend the time? We visited the town, which had nothing of note. We had not played a note for two days. Perhaps we should play an impromptu concert on the quayside. A sailor from the *SS Brighton*<sup>52</sup> which was to take us back to France took it upon himself to take up a collection on our behalf. Did he garner much? We did not want to know and the whole amount was immediately placed into a box marked 'For Shipwrecked Mariners' which was near the harbourside.

That was the last action that our Society performed on English soil. May our offering be of use to the numerous unfortunate victims of the sea. We went on board: but it did not cross our minds to organise the slightest entertainment. The sea was rough and although we struck up:

*Vers les rives de France*  
*Voguons en chantant*<sup>53</sup>

as we cast off, the tune was soon abandoned. Our steamer, the *Brighton* did not share our point of view. She *danced* quite fittingly with no need for an orchestra. Mercifully, the crossing did not last long although we did have to wait within sight of Dieppe for a favourable tide to take us in.

At last, we were on land again. We clambered into the train for Paris which had been brought right up to the quayside. The rest, you know ...

The competition in Brighton will form part of the chronicles of our Philharmonic Society. Perhaps it will one day figure in the history of Châlons. At the same time as recounting the difficulties at the start, it will show our descendants that the spirit of perseverance and a firm will to succeed are indispensable to carry out any undertaking that has once been deemed possible, and it is thanks to these excellent qualities which have never failed them, that in 1881, the musicians of the Philharmonic Society were able to complete an interesting journey, followed by a success which spread abroad the name of our town of Châlons.

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The British Library (History of Social Science Series) has published a facsimile of the original French text: ISBN 9-781249-005261

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<sup>52</sup> Sister ship to the PS Victoria on which the bands had arrived.

<sup>53</sup> 'Set for the shores of France / We sing as we sail.'